

## God-Talk And Politicians: When Does Honesty Turn Into Plain Old Pandering?

by Barry W. Lynn



**T**he Texas legislature recently decided that the state pledge of allegiance had, as one lawmaker put it, a "hole in it." They filled it with the phrase "one state under God" to parallel the 1954 change to the Pledge of Allegiance to the American flag.

I've been spending more time around Texans lately than I usually do, and they seemed to be pretty Texas-focused and God-focused, even prior to the now-filled opening.

I was invited to participate in a debate with Texas Solicitor General Ted Cruz at the annual Washington visit of Legacy, a group of young and conservative Republicans. Cruz and I had a good interchange after their Saturday night dinner.

From some of the post-debate comments, I seem to have swayed a few to see that when governments actually fund religious displays and monuments, that gets a little too up close and personal about your religion and also makes government responsible for spending on more stuff. This crowd didn't seem too happy with their taxes flowing out to any other stuff.

A few weeks later, I was one of the opening panelists at a day-long seminar in Austin on church-state relations for 96 "young leaders" sponsored by the Texas Lyceum. People really hung in for the whole array of speakers and topics, ranging from "intelligent design" and school vouchers to President George W. Bush's "faith-based" initiative.

The latter topic was discussed post-lunch by Jay Hein, the newest head of the Bush office on aid to religion, fresh from his victory at the Supreme Court where a

majority of the justices decided to limit taxpayers' standing to bring lawsuits challenging the executive's decision to spend money on religion.

Hein talked so much about how President Bush wanted to help the poor and wanted to step into crisis situations that he must have been asleep during all the years of Bush budget-slashing and possibly in a deep coma during Katrina.

Hein also took a cheap shot at David Kuo, the whistleblower who has said that Karl Rove and the Republican National Committee had hijacked the faith-based initiative for partisan purposes, implying that Kuo had actually wanted to politicize the program himself.

I met face-to-face a number of Texas journalists whom I usually only deal with voice-to-voice when they call me in Washington. The next day, *The Dallas Morning News* had a story about the event with the headline: "Faith talk is derided: Advocate for separation of church, state says both parties pandering."

The first few paragraphs were about my distaste for politicians in any party who feel the need to bring God gratuitously into every conversation or speech during campaign seasons. The story accurately quoted me as noting: "When you have Democrats and Republicans hiring ethics and religion advisers – that is to say, spin doctors – it suggests they are not really comfortable themselves knowing whatever it is they do believe."

A number of people seemed distressed by this remark. The blogosphere had considerable debate on the meaning of my words and whether they were a righteous rebuke or, in the words of Mike Lee of the "Faithfully Liberal" blog, "completely ridiculous."

Mike argued that politicians need these advisors because they "need assistance in displaying what is most likely a deeply held belief." Jesse Lava said my "heart was in the right place" but that these advisers "are in charge of political outreach" and not telling candidates what to believe.

I take criticism well and often, and it has been known to even change my mind. But no mind altering this time.

I am discouraged by the incessant use

of religion in political discourse, which began nearly as soon as the first candidate announced he was seeking the Oval Office.

*The New York Times* cited "faith consultant" Mara Vanderslice who argues that candidates should not use the phrase "separation of church and state" because of its negative connotations for religious voters. Oddly, in our First Freedom First polling and focus group work done with the Interfaith Alliance Foundation, the phrase went over very positively with the great majority of our samples.

I never suggest that a person's faith is all for show. My point is that, important as religion may actually be to many of these candidates, I honestly think most voters want to know what politicians will do to fix problems more than what metaphysical values or scriptural references, if any, could be used to justify those solutions.

Once you start talking about your faith, you also need to be prepared for journalists to ask just the kind of questions Soledad O'Brien raised in that recent televised presidential debate on CNN on religion: what do you pray about, to Senator Clinton; what is your greatest sin, to Senator Edwards?

Reporters can ask anything they want, but candidates also should be able to say the question is inappropriate (as Mitt Romney did on "60 Minutes" regarding whether he engaged in premarital sex). But if you talk a lot about the topic of religion, and then answer more questions, don't be surprised if you eventually get asked, "Do you really believe in the Virgin Birth"?

Talking about religion in a campaign turns out to be not far removed from adding religious words to the Texas pledge: whether you do it honestly or for sake of appearances, it is unnecessary verbiage in a secular society.

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